

**Robert Lowell: A Biography.** Ian Hamilton. New York: Random House, 1982, 527 pages, \$19.95.

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Robert Lowell died six years ago. He lived a turbulent, confused, and sometimes brilliant life. The English poet and literary critic, Ian Hamilton, has captured much of Lowell's personality in his *Robert Lowell: A Biography*. Hamilton spent five years tracking down sources, interviewing Lowell's acquaintances, and examining Lowell's personal papers. It paid off. At times, such as in his analysis of Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), he deepens our appreciation of Lowell's mind. It is regrettable that Hamilton rarely allows himself to speculate on the relationship between Lowell's life, his imagination, his work, and his epoch's poetic sensibility. Nevertheless, the book deserves praise. Future students of Anglo-American literature will be ill advised if they ignore this book.

Hamilton begins with a description of Lowell's parents. Both descended from prominent Boston families. Hamilton captures the essence of their relationship when he observes that: "even in his wedding photographs, and in spite of the smile, Bob [Lowell's father] contrived to recede into the background, as if all too anxious to surrender the stage to Charlotte from the very start." Charlotte Lowell dominated her husband. She disapproved of her husband. He was too weak. He had chosen the wrong career. Worst of all, he was a failure. As is often the case, Charlotte Lowell turned her attention to her son. She would make him the great man that his father never would be.

Lowell refused to be mastered. He was too much like his mother. If his mother wished to dominate him, then he would show that he was stronger. Lowell repeated this pattern throughout his life. At school he fared poorly because he rebelled against his teachers. As an adolescent Lowell dominated his closest friends. Hamilton records one episode in which Lowell decreed that one of his friends was to be a musician, another a painter. Lowell would be the poet. His personality was so strong that he convinced Frank Parker to drop out of Harvard in the middle of his freshman year to pursue a career as a painter.

Ian Hamilton traces Lowell's development in exhaustive detail. Hamilton succeeds in creating an image of the forces and individuals which shaped Lowell's career. This is the book's strongest feature. Moreover, Hamilton does not present Lowell's work in isolation. Instead, he shows that Lowell was part of a wider intellectual community that talked, argued, fought, and loved together. Hamilton has contributed much to our understanding of Robert Lowell and his place in contemporary literature.

There is something tragic about Robert Lowell. His life was governed by a struggle between opposites: order versus disorder, reason versus madness, control versus lack of restraint. His poems read as the confessions of a troubled mind. Hamilton shows that Lowell possessed the rarest of gifts. At a time when poets such as Ginsberg and

Corso were celebrating their excesses, Lowell never lost control. He told his audience what he saw and felt while avoiding sentimentality. As a poet, Lowell always managed to keep his distance.

Hamilton is right to identify the poem "Waking Early Sunday Morning" as one of the central political poems of the nineteen sixties. This is Lowell at his best. He begins with his own poetic elation. In the next line, this mood is equated with the excitement of "the President girdled by his establishment" intent as only man can be "on thinning out his kind." The final stanza transforms a poem which had begun with a description of Lowell's mania into a kind of "global elegy." Lowell writes:

Pity the planet, all joy gone  
 from this sweet volcanic cone;  
 peace to our children when they fall  
 in small war on the heels of small  
 war — until the end of time  
 to police the earth, a ghost  
 orbiting forever lost  
 in our monotonous sublime.

Much of the power of "Waking Early Sunday Morning," comes from Lowell's confessional tone. He recognizes that there is a close connection between his own manic elation and the madness of those who would "police the earth." There is a sadness that lies behind these lines. It is the sadness of a man who has looked into the madness of his times and discovered himself.

Hamilton makes the central theme of his biography turn on the struggle between Lowell's poetic restraint and his inability to order his life. Robert Lowell was an incurable manic depressive. The attacks followed a predictable pattern: First, elation; then, furious activity; finally, the collapse. Hamilton shows that Lowell understood his madness better than anyone else. In 1959 Lowell described a breakdown that occurred seven years earlier. He wrote:

I ran about the streets of Bloomington Indiana crying out against devils and homosexuals. I believed I could stop cars and paralyze their forces by merely standing in the middle of the highway with my arms outspread. Each car carried a long rod above the tail-light, and the rods were adorned with diabolic Indian or Voodoo signs. Bloomington stood for Joyce's hero and Christian regeneration. Indiana stood for evil, unexorcised, aboriginal Indians. I suspected I was a reincarnation of the Holy Ghost, and had become homicidally hallucinated. To have known the glory, violence and banality of such an experience is corrupting . . . .

There is something about Lowell. It is the element of corruption that disturbs us. Violence can be contained; banality can be tolerated. The mind, however, that wills madness, that chooses darkness because it is in love with the night, is to be feared. Lowell was aware of his manic depressive nature. He knew that he lived on the edge of madness. His genius was his ability to peer over the edge. His great failure was his inability to keep back from the abyss. Hamilton's biography catches this troubling quality. It is an impressive book. In an age that had already begun its slouch towards oblivion, Lowell spoke with an honest voice. Ian Hamilton has helped us to hear Robert Lowell.